

Book Review

Frederick C. Beiser, *Hermann Cohen: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

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Frederick Beiser's recently published intellectual biography of Hermann Cohen (1842–1918)—a philosopher that he calls the “last great thinker in the German idealist and the liberal Jewish traditions”—is another valuable installment in Beiser's long-running and extensive chronicle of post-Kantian German philosophy. It is also one of only three existing biographies of Cohen, joining an early monograph by Cohen's student, Walter Kinkel, and Andrea Poma's more recent *La filosofia critica di Hermann Cohen* (1988). Beiser's volume is distinct from these earlier works in taking Cohen's many writings on Judaism, the philosophy of religion, and the social and political life of the Jewish community into account (vii). According to Beiser, we cannot form a complete and unified account of Cohen's thought without reckoning with his deep and abiding engagement with these issues. Beiser's decision to include these writings pays a number of clear dividends. The inclusion of Cohen's writings on Zionism, religious conversion, and the importance of Jewish education, for example, help to paint a picture of the intellectual environment in which Cohen worked. Rather than an atmosphere of austere philosophical contemplation, this was a dynamic and challenging environment of ethnic and religious prejudice, communal fragmentation, and political uncertainty. But the wide scope of Beiser's survey also imposes a cost. As we will see, certain aspects of Cohen's strictly philosophical program remain underdeveloped, making it difficult to get a clear sense of what aspects of his work may have enduring philosophical value.

Following a model laid down in previous works, including his 2015 volume on the early history of Neo-Kantianism, Beiser's biography of Cohen is broadly chronological in structure, providing capsule summaries of Cohen's successive publications and lectures, from his 1865 doctoral dissertation on Plato to his magnum opus on Judaism, completed on his deathbed in 1918. Beiser complicates this structure somewhat by toggling from chapter to chapter between Cohen's philosophical and religious writings (which occasionally creates an impression of two distinct books running in parallel). In keeping with his claim regarding the unity and coherence of Cohen's work, however, Beiser also highlights the conceptual through lines that cut across this boundary, tracing their evolution over the course of Cohen's half-century career.

According to Beiser, Cohen's work bears witness to a lifelong interest in the use of psychological methods and concepts in philosophy. This can be traced to Cohen's early involvement with the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, a journal that sought to illuminate intellectual and cultural phenomena with the tools of empirical psychology, and that exerted an important influence on the founders of anthropology and sociology (22). Cohen wrote five articles for this journal throughout the 1860s, including an effort to show that metaphysical concepts such as God and soul originate from experiences and conceptions lying deep in human history, and an article seeking to show that poetry likewise has its roots in the "primitive cosmology" of our ancient forbearers (37). The decade following these articles saw the first edition of *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, characterized by its rejection of the psychological interpretation of Kant developed by authors such as Jakob Fries and Hermann von Helmholtz (55). According to Beiser, however, this did not signal a wholesale rejection of psychological methods. Cohen continues to make important use of ideas inherited from the school of *Völkerpsychologie* in his major writings on aesthetics, *Kants Begründung der Ästhetik* (1899) and *Asthetik des reinen Gefühls* (1912). And as late as the 1890s, Cohen returns to the method of historical-psychological reconstruction to provide an account of the Jewish concept of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), arguing that the idea of atonement evolved from the practice of sacrifice (167).

Beiser makes a passing but interesting comparison between Nietzsche and Cohen in the context of these historical-psychological exercises. Unlike Nietzsche, Beiser explains, Cohen does not make the mistake of thinking that by tracing a religious concept to an ancient practice, he has succeeded in discrediting that concept (35). Thus, having argued that the idea of atonement originates from the experience of sacrifice, Cohen does not go on to suggest that this idea is hopelessly tarnished by virtue of its association with a violent ritual (167). His assumption throughout is that concepts are not reducible to the extended psychological processes of refinement and transformation by which they have come down to us. Cohen avoids Nietzsche's mistake, according to Beiser, by consistently distinguishing between two kinds of question: 'quid facti', the question of how a concept, judgment, or system of judgments, has come to be; and 'quid juris', the question of the *validity* of that concept or judgment (34).

This distinction, which has its origin in Kant's *Transcendental Analytic*, plays an important role in Cohen's late writings on Judaism and the philosophy of religion. From the perspective of *quid facti*, Beiser explains, religion appears highly parochial, its purpose and meaning being to foster the cohesion and self-consciousness of particular groups of people (353). Cohen's critic Ernst Troeltsch adopts this perspective when he charges that ancient Jewish ethics should be

understood first and foremost in terms of the cultural dynamics of that society (323). As Cohen's student Benzion Kellerman points out in his reply to Troeltsch, however, this argument conflates two different questions. It implies that the validity of religious concepts and principles is settled by an examination of their origins (325). Cohen's 'transcendental' approach to religion presupposes that this is not in fact the case, and that religious ideas can have eternal, indeed universal, validity (322).

As Beiser shows, Cohen was concerned throughout his career with establishing the universal validity of Jewish religious concepts in particular. Much like his engagement with psychological concepts and methods, this can be traced to his first decade of philosophical activity. In a lecture of 1869, Cohen argues that the Judaic idea of the sabbath involves an ethical claim that is universally binding. It asserts that all people, across all social classes, are entitled to the same share of rest (50).¹ Later, in the midst of an upsurge in antisemitism, Cohen authored an urgent denial of the alleged particularism of the Jewish religion. According to Cohen, the Judaic concept of love of neighbor implies an ethical concern for all human beings, hence a recognition of the unity of the human race (128). Toward the end of his life, Cohen predicated his opposition to Zionism on precisely the same set of principles. For Cohen, Judaism is intrinsically universal in scope. To identify Judaism with a particular nation or ethnic group is to echo the anti-Semite's insistence on the distinctness of Jews (313).

In contrast to the stability of Cohen's perspective on the meaning of the Jewish religion, his view on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity underwent considerable transformation over the course of his career. At a relatively early moment, Cohen stresses the similarity between these religions, suggesting that they share essentially the same values and beliefs (120). Strikingly, he even perceives a kinship in what looks like the starkest difference between the two confessions: the issue of the divinity of Christ. According to Cohen, the idea that God is incarnated in a particular human being need not be viewed strictly literally.

¹ Cohen's argument for this interpretation of sabbath involves an amusing instance of foreshadowing that Beiser does not mention. According to Cohen, we are entitled to overlook the rationale that is provided for the sabbath in the second book of Moses—according to which the sabbath memorializes the fact that God rested on the seventh day of creation—in favor of the rationale provided in the fifth book of Moses—according to which the sabbath is an acknowledgment of the fact that servants, as well as masters, are entitled to rest. He explains that the second book is actually modeled on the fifth, despite occurring earlier in the Book of Moses. This prefigures an important claim from *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, according to which Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic is conceptually subordinate to the Transcendental Analytic, in spite of the fact that the Aesthetic precedes the Analytic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In both cases, one suspects that philology has been placed in service of a prior philosophical commitment.

It can also be viewed abstractly, in terms of Kantian moral autonomy. As such, it recapitulates a value that also appears in Judaism (120).

As Beiser's account makes clear, this desire for inter-confessional unity became difficult for Cohen to maintain amidst the rising hostility toward Jews in Germany and across Europe. By the beginning of the new century, accordingly, we see a shift in Cohen's tone. Far from emphasizing the similarity between Judaism and Christianity, he now looks to point out the important differences between them, and indeed to demonstrate the various ways in which Judaism is superior to Christianity. This turns in part on the very difference that he was once inclined to downplay. Cohen now maintains that the idea of Christ's divinity involves a mystical, or speculative, element that is absent from Judaism (214). What's more, this idea inserts a mediator between God and human beings (214). Part of the merit of Judaism, from Cohen's perspective, is that it fosters an immediate relation—or a 'correlation'—with the divine (283). Finally, Judaism is ethically superior to Christianity because it is firmly grounded in *this world*, rather than a transcendent, unknowable beyond (210, 284).

Beiser also draws attention to a subtler shift in Cohen's religious thought. In works from around the turn of the century, Cohen maintains that religion is subordinate to ethics; indeed, that religion is fated to be entirely absorbed (*aufgehoben*) in ethics (218). The basis for this prediction is straightforward. For the author of *Ethik des Reinen Willens* (1904), the purpose of religion is the cultivation of ethical consciousness (232). The mystical and metaphysical aspects that characterize religion in popular consciousness will inevitably be discarded as its rational, purely ethical essence is disclosed. In *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919), however, Cohen admits that this picture of religion is incomplete. At the very end of his life, he acknowledges that religion falls to some extent outside of ethics, in the sense that it addresses the individual person *as* an individual. In contrast to ethics, which can only regard the individual as a member of a community, having the same rights and responsibilities as every other member, religion understands the individual as having certain purely individual interests, such as atonement, or redemption (361–2).

According to his celebrated student Franz Rosenzweig, Cohen's late recognition of the significance of the individual is not simply a minor qualification. It signals nothing less than an abandonment of his core philosophical position. Whereas Cohen's 'critical idealism' entails that nothing is purely 'given', that everything is a construction of reason, he now appears to acknowledge that at least one thing—the individual—is purely given. The individual seems to stand outside of the world constructed by reason, as a kind of brute, "preceding factuality". This dramatic assertion does not follow from Cohen's comparatively modest claim in any clear sense, and Beiser appropriately declines to sign on to it. In the process of defending

Cohen, however, Beiser makes a questionable argument of his own. According to Beiser, Cohen is perfectly capable of explaining how reason constructs the individual, having done so in his well-known 1883 book on the infinitesimal method in mathematics. But there is a significant difference between an individual *sensible thing* and an individual *person*. Cohen's infinitesimal method arguably explains the rational construction of the former; but it is not at all obvious how this method could explain the rational construction of the latter. In this sense, Rosenzweig's challenge remains unanswered. If there is a Cohenian story to tell about how the individual person comes to be constructed by reason, Beiser has not supplied it.

Beiser is on more solid ground in his account of how Cohen's critical idealism should be understood in a general sense. Contrary to the impression conveyed by Cohen's *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902)—a work that scandalized its early readers with its apparent abandonment of Cohen's previously articulated positions—critical idealism does not entail that reason *creates* the objects of experience out of whole cloth. Rather, critical idealism amounts to the more anodyne claim that reason is relentless in its quest to comprehend the object of experience. Reason cannot allow some aspect of experience to factor as a primitive, extra-rational element. It strives to explain any such element as being itself a construction of reason. The position results in a different conception of the relation between concept and intuition than the one that we find in Kant. Whereas for Kant, the boundary between concept and intuition is fixed—with space and time, for example, firmly on the side of intuition—Cohen conceives this boundary as provisional (199–200). What factors at one moment as intuition, as an undigested element in our ever-deepening engagement with the sensible world, can—and indeed must—subsequently migrate to the side of concept, or reason.

Beiser describes this imperative at the heart of critical idealism—the imperative to explain any apparently self-evident intuition as a construction of reason—as Cohen's 'method of hypothesis' (180). One of his central claims is that this method plays a unifying role in Cohen's thought, taking root in his early writings on Plato, and extending across his diverse body of work. One of the frustrating aspects of Beiser's book, though, is his failure to fully explain what this method actually entails. This begins at the most basic level. Leaving aside the question of what reason *is* in the first place—which a more critical account of Cohen's thought might have explored—what does it mean to explain the content of experience as a construction of reason? For the reader who is not already acclimatized to transcendental philosophy, this effort will likely appear quite mysterious, and Beiser does not spend any time clarifying it.

Additional obscurities result from Beiser's claims regarding the implications of the method of hypothesis. According to Beiser, the method of hypothesis entails that "all results of scientific work are only provisional" (136–7), meaning that

science is destined never to arrive at a final conclusion. But it is unclear why this follows. Why should we expect the rational construction of nature to proceed infinitely? More to the point, why should the dynamics of a second-order, philosophical activity, have any bearing on the dynamics of first-order, scientific activity? Even if philosophical inquiry is destined to proceed infinitely, why does this entail that physics or biology must proceed infinitely? It is conceivable that Cohen has answers to these questions. Beiser, however, does not supply them, possibly because the broad scope of his account does not allow him to linger on comparatively narrow philosophical problems. Future scholarship on Cohen's work, one hopes, will unpack these ambitious claims more fully than Beiser is able to do. Such work will no doubt benefit immensely from the comprehensive and thematically unified picture of Cohen's thought that Beiser has provided.